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ABSTRACT

This discussion of the economic, social, health, and educational crisis facing African-American children is based on 20 years of statistical data and the history of U.S. legislative programs for the benefit of children in this century. It is noted that children in general are not valued in the United States, and that African-American children in particular occupy a low priority on the American public policy agenda. The limitations of the well-intended Great Society programs for children are described, with specific attention given to Head Start (authorized under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964), the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC, the Child Nutrition Act of 1966), and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Discussion then turns to five promises that should be made to children now. Each promise relates to a right that every child should have, namely, the right to: (1) live in a loving family that has access to the support it needs to care properly for its children; (2) receive safe, affordable, high quality child care while his or her parents are at work; (3) be enrolled in a national health care system that afford him/her access to high quality health care and health providers; (4) live in a real home, and not a hotel, shelter, hostel, or half-way house; and (5) experience academic achievement and receive high quality education in a public school. Contains 44 references. (LB)

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Our Children: Miles to Go, Promises to Keep

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On May 16, 1991, The Committee of Black Psychiatrists of the American Psychiatric Association presented its Soloman Carter Fuller Award to Evelyn K. Moore, M.A. The award recognizes Evelyn K. Moore for demonstrating the qualities of scholarship and community leadership, and for the furtherance of the mental health of Black people, so emphasized by Dr. Soloman Carter Fuller, America's first Black psychiatrist.

Our Children:
Miles to Go and Promises to Keep

May 16, 1991

On the eve of this twenty-first century, the National Black Child Development Institute took a twenty-year snapshot of African American children,[1] and this is what we found:

- Nearly half of all African American children live in poverty.[2]
- For African American mothers, the wait for appointments at hospital-based maternity clinics can be as long as five weeks.[3]
- African American mothers of all ages are more likely to bear low birth weight babies than their white counterparts.[4]
- African American children comprised 51% of all pediatric AIDS cases reported through March 1990. Half of the African American children suffering from AIDS were exposed to the HIV virus through their mother's drug use.[5]
- White students continue to score 36 to 45 points higher than African American students on science achievement tests.[6]
- The average mathematics achievement scores of African American students are 20 points lower than the average scores for white students at all age levels.[7]
- Almost 23% of African American children ages 12 to 17 have been suspended from school, contrasted with 12% of children generally.[8]

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[1]National Black Child Development Institute, *The Status of African American Children: Twentieth Anniversary Report* (Washington, DC: National Black Child Development Institute, 1990).

[2]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 37.

[3]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 7.

[4]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 48.

[5]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 50.

[6]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 75.

[7]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 74.

[8]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 77.

- African American males are seven to eight times more likely than white males to be homicide victims. Young African American females are four to five times more likely to be homicide victims than young white females.[9]
- The confinement of African American juveniles in detention facilities has increased by 40% since 1979.[10]

Although these statistics are grim, there are some positive changes that we noted during this twenty-year period.

- The African American children of today are more than twice as likely as African American children of past generations to have parents who graduated from high school.[11]
- African American teenage girls have experienced declining birth rates since 1970.[12]
- The population of middle-class African Americans is becoming more and more powerful with growing numbers of influential African Americans.[13]

The presentation today, however, will not deal with these gains. The dire and growing crisis faced by low-income African American children is more pressing and threatens to undermine the advances that have been made. Unless we address the way that our nation responds to this crisis, the life chances of thousands of African American children will continue to be poor.

The United States is the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world. So why do American children suffer this way? Why aren't children valued in the United States? These are the questions that haunt those of us who work on behalf of American children.

The fact that children are not valued in the United States relegates them to a low priority. African American children occupy an even lower

[9]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 108.
[10]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 103.
[11]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 35.
[12]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 48.
[13]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 2.

priority. The philosophy of the public policy agenda in the United States has been rooted in the belief in the privacy and sanctity of the individual family unit. This has led to a non-interventionist stance which limits the role of government unless there is a dire reason for action. Respect for the privacy of family life and parents is critical, but this policy set the stage for not providing the universal support system needed by all families.

The government, early on, failed to recognize that families need partners in the care and support of their children. They need support in their child-rearing functions from both private and public sources to promote the healthy growth and development of their children. Consider how important organizations like the Girl Scouts and community churches play in the lives of children. Just as these groups are important, government programs are equally important to insure the proper care of children. If a perspective incorporating this understanding had been adopted early in our history, it would have resulted, I believe, in a prevention strategy versus one of intervention. This was not to be the case.

In looking back at the nation's first efforts to build a child welfare system, we saw, as early as 1900, a group of social workers and reformers approach President Theodore Roosevelt to propose a White House Conference. This conference—the 1909 Conference on the Care of Dependent Children—addressed the needs of families which lacked a normal breadwinner.[14] This early conference provided a strong impetus for the establishment of the Children's Bureau in 1912, the first major Federal effort to address the rights and needs of children. The conference also sparked the drive for the development of national voluntary child welfare organizations.

Other significant steps were taken during this period. In 1923, the International Union of Child Welfare issued a five-point "Declaration of the

[14]Gilbert Y. Steiner, *The Children's Cause* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 1976), pp. 17–18.

Rights of the Child." This was followed by United Nations "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" in 1948 which called for special safeguards and care for children, both before and after birth. The United Nations General Assembly reaffirmed this declaration in 1959.[15] The Joint Commission on the Mental Health of Children, during the latter part of the 1960s, called for child advocacy and services for children. In more recent times, we witnessed the 1970 White House Conference on Children that determined child care to be the nation's number one priority.

These are some of the first and foremost advocacy efforts on behalf of children, the beginning of stronger promises to support families and their children. That is the good news. The bad news is that the framework established in 1909 has continued to serve as the conceptual framework for building programs for children. This public policy posture was grounded in an intervention strategy versus one of prevention. It was based on a deficit model orientation, and it was reactive versus pro-active.

The United States government has promised to assist primarily those families living in poverty. Thus, the federal government provides welfare payments to low-income families with children, and basically excludes the marginally poor family. Even worse, the payments it provides are insufficient to lift families out of poverty and cannot begin to address the many barriers to their productive employment.

This is in contrast to a number of industrialized European countries which provide a children's allowance—for all children no matter what their family's income may be. These countries reflect a collective commitment and understanding of the basic concept that it is prudent to invest in chil-

[15]Beatrice Gross and Ronald Gross, eds., *The Children's Rights Movement: Overcoming the Oppression of Young People* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1997), p. 19.

dren on the front end—far less expensive than paying for their remediation, rehabilitation, or incarceration later on.

In the United States, the family and children's programs which have been ushered in continue to remain targeted at the lowest-income families, continue to provide only minimal levels of support, and continue to keep families in the grips of economic insufficiency. One such program is Title IV of the Social Security Act of 1935, originally ADC, and what we have come to know as AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and its many amendments and reforms—the latest being the Family Support Act of 1988. The Family Support Act, intended to reform welfare, still focuses primarily on single-parent families, with mothers as the main recipients of the service. FSA promises to train mothers and to help them find gainful employment. The jury is still out on this program.

The American policy of reaction versus proaction is also illustrated by our policy regarding child labor. During most of our country's history, children were pressed into the labor force at young ages without protection from hazards. Children worked under extremely harsh conditions in fields, mills, and mines. Children worked incredibly long hours.

We like to think of this cruelty to children as something that occurred a long time ago, but sadly, this is not the case. Comprehensive national child labor laws were enacted only about 60 years ago in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. They promised children protection from unsafe working conditions and an opportunity to pursue education. But despite these laws, it has been recently reported that sweatshops employing child laborers, particularly minority children, are alive and well; Jeffrey Newman, the director of the National Child Labor Committee says, and I quote, "If you think the epidemic of child labor abuse has disappeared or diminished take a walk through

Chinatown or the garment district of New York."[16] The story is just as bad from the citrus groves of Florida, to the farms of Iowa, to the suburbs with their many fast food restaurants.

We have many miles to go and promises to keep . . .

The most sweeping example of reactive versus pro-active policy is found in President Johnson's War On Poverty—Public Law 88-452: The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. This was perhaps the program that promised the most—it promised to act as a lifeline out of poverty. The promise was again made to low-income families and their children. Upon careful examination, we find that only a small portion of these families were ever served. What we all believed to be one of the most substantial efforts to provide public support for children and families was a broken promise at best from the very beginning. I would like to cite three examples of the Great Society's programs:

Head Start. (Authorized under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964) Head Start was initiated in 1964 on the basis of research that had been conducted by a number of developmental psychologists and educators. These researchers found that experimental programs in early childhood education were successful in improving the achievement scores of children ages three and four by providing them a high quality preschool experience with a home visit component. Consisting of a curriculum based on the principles of early childhood education in combination with health care, nutrition, and family support services, Head Start has become the nation's model preschool program for low-income families. In fact, Head Start is a good program for any family.

In 1990, Head Start provided comprehensive services to more than 548,000 children.[17] Almost 36 percent of Head Start staff are parents of

[16]Michael Spector, "Illegal Child Labor Resurging in U.S.," *Washington Post*, April 14, 1991, p. A8.

[17]Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children: 1991* (Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund, 1991), p. 44.

current or former Head Start children. It is a wonderful program, a program with outreach into the community that has really ushered in the faith and participation of parents. It demonstrated that parents could become pivotal partners in the education of children.

The Head Start program promised to provide children from low-income families with a chance to compete on an equal footing with their more advantaged peers when they entered the public schools. However, our nation has miles to go to fulfill the promise of the Head Start program. The program only serves 27% of the eligible children at a time when the social problems of substance abuse, homelessness are increasing.[18]

Miles to go . . . and promises to keep.

WIC. (Child Nutrition Act of 1966) The WIC program (1972)—Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children—feeds poor pregnant or nursing women and their babies. The purpose of the WIC program is to improve the quality of maternal health and maternal weight gain during pregnancy, increase infant birth weight, and reduce the risk of infant death due to malnutrition.

This program has been highly successful in meeting its goals. A study conducted last year by Mathematica Policy Research Institute[19] found that when women received WIC packages during pregnancy, Medicaid spending was as much as $598 less for mother and child during the first 60 days after birth. And because pregnant women must accept medical checkups to be eligible for the diet supplements, WIC participants get earlier and more frequent prenatal care than other poor women.

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[18]Conversation with Clennie Murphy, Associate Commissioner, Head Start Bureau, Department of Health and Human Services, April 1991.

[19]Barbara Devaney, Linda Belheimer, and Jennifer Schore, *The Savings in Medicaid Costs for Newborns and their Mothers from Prenatal Participation in the WIC Program* (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research Institute, 1991.

This program, without a doubt, is a valuable preventive program for children and their families. The success of WIC is so well documented and far reaching that a panel of major corporate heads, representing companies such as AT&T and the Prudential Insurance Company, testified before the House Budget Committee in March 1991, recommending that "every woman, infant and child who is eligible for WIC in 1995 and later years . . . be served by the program."[20]

Unfortunately, as things currently stand, the promise of adequate nutrition and medical care for pregnant women and infants remains unfulfilled. The WIC program is only available to low-income families and reaches *only 55% of the low-income women, infants and children who are eligible.*[21]

Elementary & Secondary Education Act of 1965. This law was considered to be one of the most dramatic pieces of educational legislative reform to pass the Congress. The authors of this act intended to provide equity and access to education for children of low-income families. Under this act, Chapter One, with a funding level of about 6 billion dollars this fiscal year, continues to provide supplementary education services to low-income children in public school settings. However, services are effectively denied to about 50% of the children who need them.[22] Once again, too little, too late.

I have given examples of three federal programs based upon intervention. These programs are well intended, but do not even come near the mark in terms of serving and supporting all fam-

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[20]Testimony presented at the United States House of Representatives Budget Committee Hearing on "Corporate Support for the WIC Program, 1991" on March 6, 1991.

[21]Robert Greenstein and Loring Henderson, *New USDA Estimates of WIC Eligibility Improve Upon Previous Estimates, But Problems Remain* (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1991) p. 1.

[22]August F. Hawkins, *The Chairman's Report on Children in America: A Strategy for the 100th Congress* (Washington, DC: U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor, 1986), p. 15.

ilies and children who are eligible, or in addressing their underlying needs in a comprehensive, preventive mode.

We have miles to go and promises to keep to our children here in the United States. *The question becomes, what promises should be made to America's children, and what should we do to keep them?*

First: Every child has a right to live in a loving family which has access to the support necessary to care properly for its children. Every child needs to grow up in a stable, economically secure family. In 1987, the average African American family income amounted to $15,005, which was only 47 percent of the average white family income.[23] Fifteen thousand dollars annually is not enough money to meet living expenses, but too much money to qualify for government assistance programs.

So the first challenge, as I see it, is to help adults take on their rightful position as heads of household. I believe that work is basic to being a healthy person, and it is a connector to self-esteem. Work provides the ability to pay for the basic necessities of food, housing, clothing, health care, and transportation for oneself and one's family. A person's employment status is a primary determinant of his or her stability and, in the case of families, can enormously effect the quality of life for children. Equal employment opportunity is a must, with meaningful work which includes adequate pay, job mobility, and job satisfaction.

The passage of the Humphrey Hawkins Act, Public Law 95-523: The Full Employment and Balance Growth Act of 1978, provided hope for full employment goals, but the goals were never realized. The 1979–80 slow down, the recession of 1982, and now, the recession of the 1990s have caused the nation's economy to fall further behind. This, combined with the decline of manufacturing in the United States and our inadequate

[23]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 37.

educational system, has left a critical gap in employment opportunities for African Americans.

The advocacy agenda for children must include the elimination of discrimination in the job market and an educational agenda that prepares our children for the labor force of the twenty-first century.

Second: Every child has the right to safe, affordable quality child care while his or her parents are at work. Child care should be universally available and publicly supported. If we, as a nation, are serious about putting people to work and strengthening the labor market economy, we must be equally serious about child care for working parents and for those in work-related training or educational programs. Even though we are all proud of the passage of a significant piece of legislation, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, we cannot stop here. Child care is a critical economic component of support for African American families. It must be available for two-parent families in which both parents work, and single heads of household, as well as for low-income families and the working poor.

Quality child care—which involves trained staff, small pupil-teacher ratios, and a developmentally appropriate curriculum—not only supports the family, it also benefits the child. Research has provided evidence over the years supporting positive outcomes in all areas of growth and development for children who have quality care. Such programs serve to provide a rich experience for low-income children whose circumstances limit their educational exposure. Unfortunately, accessible and affordable child care is not a reality for all families.

We still have miles to go and promises to keep to our children and families in this important area.

Third: Every child has a right to be enrolled in a national health care system with access to quality health care and caring health providers. Only 56 percent of African American children have health insurance, compared to 83 percent of

white children.[24] According to a report published by the National Black Child Development Institute, in 1988, about one million African American children had not seen a physician in over two years.[25] And dental care was even less common for African American children than other medical care. In 1988, over 38% of African American children had not seen a dentist within a year.[26]

African American mothers of all ages are more likely to bear low birth weight babies than white women of all ages.[27] The high infant mortality rate that continues to exist in this country is well known. A recent report of the National Center for Health Statistics of the Department of Health and Human Services[28] proudly announces the largest decline in infant mortality in a decade. The decline was to 9.1 deaths for 1,000 live births in 1990 from 9.7 deaths for 1,000 live births in 1989.[29] Any decline in infant mortality is laudable, for each child's life is precious. So this is the good news . . .

But here is the bad news. Once again, it is sadly reported that the infant mortality rate for African American children remains at a dismal two-to-one ratio when compared to white infants.[30] This is nothing less than a national disgrace. Health care should be a basic right for every single child in America. And we can make it possible.

Health officials in New York and New Jersey report a measles epidemic. New York City alone has reported almost as many cases in the first four months of this year as in all of 1990, creating the most serious measles epidemic in more than a decade. Most of the cases have been among

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[24]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 45.

[25]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 45.

[26]NBCDI, *Stauts Report*, p. 46.

[27]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 48.

[28]National Center for Health Statistics, *Health: United States, 1990* Hyattsville, MD: Public Health Service, 1991).

[29]National Center for Health Statistics, *Health: United States, 1990*, p. 11.

[30]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 50.

preschool age Hispanic or Black children.[31] The American Academy of Pediatrics estimates that only one in every four American children is fully immunized against diseases like measles, whooping cough, mumps, and polio.[32]

This unnecessary spread of disease can easily be attributed to the fact that approximately 12 million children, or one in every six children, has no health insurance.[33] Poor children are twice as likely as affluent children to have physical or mental disabilities. Of course, there is a disproportionate number of African American children represented within this group. We have miles to go and promises to keep to our children.

Fourth: Every child has a right to a home—not a hotel, not a shelter, not a hostel or a half-way house—but a home. Affordable housing must become available. You are all aware that there is a housing crisis for families as well as for single adults in America today. In major urban areas, the housing crisis is so severe that families are living temporarily in hotels. Black children are more than two and one half times as likely as their white counterparts to live in substandard housing.[34] Studies have established a relationship between the quality of housing and incidence of psychological problems. Overcrowding can have a negative impact on a family's health, and children are vulnerable to behavioral conditions which result from lack of space and inadequate facilities.

One of the most damaging results of inadequate housing is the dissolution of family units. The government has done very little since the 1970s to promote the maintenance and construction of low-cost housing.[35] In a recent study

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[31]Thomas Morgan, "Measles Cases Are Epidemic in the Region," *New York Times*, April 19, 1991, p. B1.

[32]American Academy of Pediatrics, *Children First ... A Legislative Proposal* (Washington, DC: American Academy of Pediatrics, 1991), p. 1.

[33]American Academy of Pediatrics, *Children First*, p. 2.

[34]NBCDI, *Status Report*, p. 97.

[35]National Black Child Development Institute, *Who Will Care When Parents Can't: A Study of Black Children in*

conducted by NBCDI, we found that one of the major reasons why children enter foster care is inadequate housing. Consequently, children have been placed into foster care in large numbers because of substandard housing.[36] The longer children remain in foster care, the less likely they are to be reunified with their families.

Probably the most heart-wrenching aspect of the housing crisis is homelessness. Today, families with children make up one third of the nation's homeless population. On any given night in 1989, the population of homeless children was larger than the total number of children in Pittsburgh or the entire population of Ann Arbor, Michigan.[37] It is a national disgrace that children are living in cars, in subway stations, on the street.

In the Housing Act of 1949, the Federal government codified its promise to ensure the availability of decent, affordable housing to all Americans. However, in the 1980s, the construction of low-cost housing came to a virtual standstill. Government loans to develop low-cost housing have diminished significantly.[38]

The Council of Large Public Housing Authorities estimates that more than 2 million parents and children are on waiting lists for low-cost housing, many waiting as long as five years.[39] Currently, families must rely on the distribution of Section 8 certificates and vouchers to cover the cost of housing. Two progressive measures are the Cranston-Gonzales National Affordable Housing Act of 1990 (P.L. 101–625)—a law that makes it difficult for owners of housing built with federal support to raise rents and evict low-income residents—and the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, as amended (1990) (P.L. 100–77)—which is aimed at removing barriers

Foster Care (Washington, DC: National Black Child Development Institute, 1989), p. 50.

[36]NBCDI, *Who Will Care?*, p. 50.

[37]CDF, *State of Children*, p. 109–110.

[38]CDF, *State of Children*, p. 111–112.

[39]CDF, *State of Children*, p. 113.

that keep homeless children from attending school. But we still have a long way to go, and the government is not adequately addressing the need to increase the supply of affordable housing. We must intensify our advocacy in the area of housing.

Fifth: Every child has a right to achieve academically, regardless of income or family background, and the right to a quality education in a public school. As many of my colleagues have pointed out in their research on African American families, education is highly valued by African American families, and our push for education has been a great strength. We continue to push, and we cannot stress education enough.

In inner-city schools as well as those in rural areas where large numbers of poor children live, relevant curricula to prepare children to develop analytical skills and to perform well in an increasingly technological era are imperative. Of particular concern is the need to increase poor children's performances in math and science.

The job market has been changed by the high tech era—the computer age. But where are poor children and children of color in this process? How many inner-city schools have fully equipped computer labs or computerized classrooms? Computers are reshaping the socio-economic structure of this nation, but will our children of the urban ghettos across the nation be prepared for this brave new world?

On April 18, 1991, President Bush announced *America 2000: An Education Strategy*[40] to be implemented by the year 2000. This new blueprint for education is calling for a renaissance in education and new levels of accountability. We definitely need this renaissance, and we definitely need accountability. I agree with the President that we do not need no-fault education. There will be innovative school models in every congressional district; there will be federal money to help

[40]President George Bush, *America 2000: An Education Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1991).

disadvantaged students who choose to go to private and parochial schools, a concept which is referred to commonly as parental choice. The involvement of the business community and a national voluntary testing program are also being proposed. It is exciting that we are embarking on a new national direction. But I would point to three cautions:

1) I believe that choices for parents cannot be attained without providing parents the resources to make these choices real. However, there seems to be little information available on exactly how much money will be provided to parents.

2) The second point is directed at the call for a national voluntary testing program. We cannot test our children before we teach them. Moreover, just when private schools are eliminating testing, why would we want to reaffirm its over-emphasis in our public school?

3) Finally, while we should support the President's efforts to remold our educational system, we must, as a nation, remain committed to public school education. I agree with Senator Kennedy when he says it's great that education is on the front pages of the newspapers and is being discussed in the oval office. However, "The important idea of educational choice should not become a death sentence for public schools struggling to serve disadvantaged students."[41]

In the African American community, education has always been the lifeline out of poverty for us. It was considered the ultimate in status and achievement. I think our most critical calling in this regard is to reclaim and reinstate education in our communities at the grassroots level—this means in the home, in the neighborhood, and in the churches. For this reason, the National Black Child Development Institute has called to the community to participate in supplementary education programs.

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[41]Susan Chira, "Bush Presses Bill Allowing Parents to Choose Schools," *New York Times*, April 19, 1991, p. A1.

One of the most tragic parts of our children's dilemma is that many of them are floating in space without an anchor. They yearn for an attachment, so when the drug dealer reaches out to them, the connection they are looking for is made.

Let me tell you about a boy named Willie. Willie is Black. He had a reputation for being belligerent and disruptive in school activities and initiating fights with peers. In desperation, Willie's mother enrolled him in an NBCDI program, Each One Reach One: The Spirit of Excellence, a tutoring and mentoring program. On the first day of the program, Willie was asked what he wanted to be when he grew up. "Nothing," Willie replied.

NBCDI's volunteers reached out to Willie. Each day, they tutored him in basic academic skills, exposed him to Black history and culture, talked about things he could become when he grew up and just spent time listening to him, letting him know they cared.

The results? After two weeks, Willie was the first to arrive each morning, often bringing friends from his housing project. He carried his "journal" with him everywhere so he could take notes on what he learned. After four weeks of our summer enrichment program, Willie was again asked what he wanted to become. This time his reply was, "Mayor." What we have found that has been especially heartening to us is that Black boys, referred to by Jewelle Taylor Gibbs as an endangered species,[42] can be a productive species if put into a one-to-one situation. They become less hyperactive, they are no longer belligerent, and in fact are once again turned on to learning.

We have thousands of Willies out there just waiting for us, thousands of our children who cannot grasp a hand until someone reaches out, who will always look for a way out unless someone like you, and me, and others like us show them a way forward. As Jeanne Spurlock notes,

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[42]Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, ed., *Young, Black, and Male in America: An Endangered Species* (Dover, MA: Auburn House Publishing Co., 1988), p. 1.

"The immediate presence of positive role models is an asset in the development of self-esteem that is too often overlooked ..."[43] Collectively and individually, we must become involved with the children, the children, the children.

Employment of Youth. Perhaps one of the most devastating aspects of our crises is the inability of thousands of youth to find productive work. Equally tragic is the condition of youth who want to work—but do not have the training nor basic, prerequisite social and educational skills to hold a job. The cost of letting our youth be ill-prepared to this level is unconscionable and must be reversed. John Wilson, the Chairman of the District of Columbia's city council, discussed on Sunday, the fact that urban economics cannot support the huge numbers of unskilled people in United States cities—a situation that breeds crime, and illiteracy. He stated, "We have to look at the fact that we have created in this society just too many people who have absolutely nothing to lose."

You in this audience know firsthand the increased violence and depression which children are experiencing and the external danger which exist in so many of their environments. The mental health of our children is in peril and must receive urgent attention.

Ann F. Brunswick, Senior Research Scientist in Public Health at Columbia University suggests that:

> If anything is to produce change in drug use behavior and correlated conditions it is preparing young African American men for, and providing meaningful access to gainful employment opportunities. Otherwise, they must continue to listen to the beat of a different drummer and to look for alternative activities and experiences to attempt to satisfy what they share with all young people—needs for growth and self realization, for affiliation, for respect

[43]Jeanne Spurlock, "Development of Self-concept in Afro-American Children," *Hospital and Community Psychiatry*, XXXVII (January 1987) 67.

from others, for social belonging, and basic to all of these, for a source of material sustenance.[44]

I have outlined what I believe to be some significant promises that we should be making—and keeping—for our children. We must start by analyzing and correcting the true manner in which we treat children. In doing so, we will not only solve many of the serious problems now plaguing our country, we will also produce social benefits for humanity at large. The words of Chester Pierce and Gail Allen still ring true today. "Children remain the most oppressed group and the most easily oppressed group. The more we understand about the oppression of children, the more we understand about the oppression of any group or individual."[45] Thus, we must continue our crusade for children.

Finally, we are beginning to see a national ground swelling in support of children and families. An example of this is reflected in the recent progressive measures passed by the Congress as well as those on the docket. In 1990, the Congress passed the largest child care bill in its history, the Child Care and Development Block Grant. This measure will serve to take us one step closer to keeping the promises we make to our children and families. The National Black Child Development Institute recently testified on child welfare legislation. We cited findings from our two studies on child welfare: *Who Will Care When Parents Can't* and *Parental Drug Abuse*. There is child welfare legislation on the docket. There is also a National Commission on Children working to expand and improve program services to children. Other signals include the unthinkable combination of Phylliss Schafley and Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder working on a family initiative, the partnership of government and the business community calling for radical reforms in public

[44]Gibbs, *Young, Black, and Male*, p. 184.

[45]Chester Pierce, M.D. and Gail B. Allen, M.D., "Childism," *Psychiatric Annals*, V (July 1975) 24.

schools, and progressive measures being introduced by HUD to encourage ownership of low-income housing by the tenants.

Sometimes, I think that it will take nothing less than a miracle to achieve a life of quality for all of our children and their families. But fifteen months ago, all of us witnessed the release of Mr. Mandela . . . nothing less than a miracle . . . In addition, we witnessed the dismantling of the Berlin wall . . . nothing less than a miracle . . . and we learn from this that the fight for freedom is a long and difficult one—but victory can be won.

In closing, I would say to each of you who has shared the struggle faced by our Black children and know some of the potential hardships which they are yet to encounter. Having endured in spite of the struggles and hardships, you are uniquely qualified to build a future for our children. For what can we accomplish if our children do not thrive? What can we save or be proud of if we have not given our children the strength, the endurance, the will and the way to continue this journey beyond places we have travelled?

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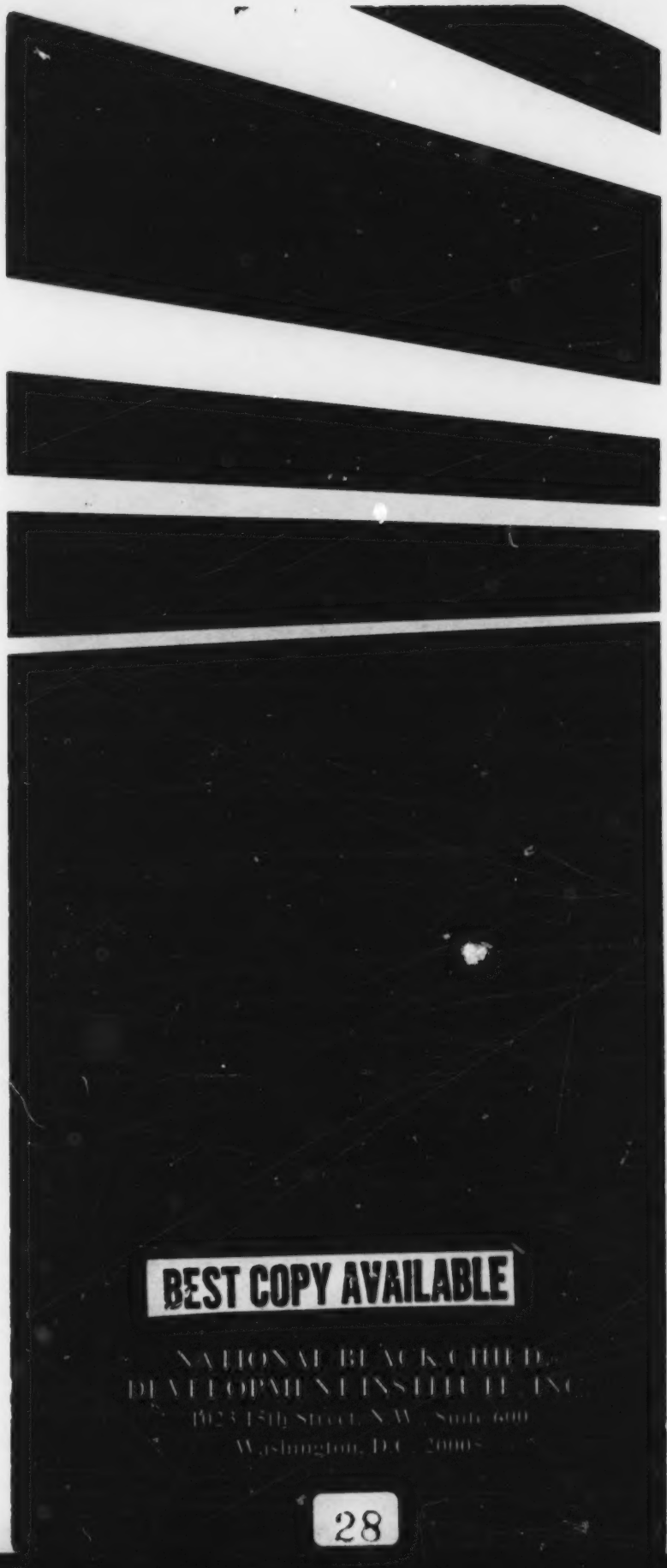
ABOUT NBCDI

The National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI), founded in 1970, is dedicated to improving the quality of life for Black children and their families. NBCDI is the first national organization of its kind.

NBCDI focuses primarily on issues and services that fall within four major areas: health, child welfare, education, and child care/early childhood education. NBCDI monitors public policy issues that affect Black children and educates the public by publishing periodic reports and two quarterly newsletters, as well as convening an annual conference and other public education forums. The NBCDI affiliate network, comprised of hardworking volunteers from all walks of life, provides direct services to Black children and youth such as conducting tutorial programs, helping homeless children find adoptive homes, and sponsoring culturally enriching programs and activities.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